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## *House of Representatives*

# RECOGNIZING THE SERVICE OF UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE VETERANS

**HON. BOB FILNER**

OF CALIFORNIA  
IN THE HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. CUMMINGS. Mr. Speaker, I yield 5 minutes to the very distinguished gentleman from California (Mr. *Filner*). He is the author of this resolution, and, without a doubt, in this Congress, be it on whatever side, either side of the aisle, he has distinguished himself as being a fierce fighter for the rights and benefits of our veterans.

Mr. FILNER. I thank the chairman not only for his kind words, but for bringing this resolution to us on National Maritime Day, and for his making the connection between what we are doing today and the historical record that we as a Nation, I think, have to recognize and correct.

This resolution, H. Res. 413, does recognize the heroic and brave service of the Merchant Marine veterans who have gone unheralded by this country for far too long. Of course, this is the best time to do this, on National Maritime Day, which was first celebrated in 1933. It is intended to recognize the invaluable role that

the maritime industry in general and the Merchant Marine in particular served to our Nation's economy and to our security.

Throughout our Nation's history, the Merchant Marine has played a crucial part in ensuring our freedom and security during war and in transporting our commerce during peace.

This day was conceptualized by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, who firmly believed, as we continue to, that the Nation needed a strong Merchant Marine to serve as an auxiliary to our naval and other military forces during war. In fact, the Merchant Marine has participated in every war since serving as the Nation's first Navy, helping George Washington's Continental Army defeat the British.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, 29 Merchant Marine Academy cadets operated a fleet of boats in New York Harbor,

transporting the firefighters and other emergency equipment workers and medical supplies.

It is interesting to note that the United States Merchant Marine Academy is the only one of our five military academies that will send its cadets into war; and, in fact, we have lost 142 of those cadets since World War II.

Today, more than 8,000 merchant mariners serve in the Military Sealift Command, most working in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

I thank my colleague for bringing up the situation of our World War II veterans. As he said, it is too late to give them education benefits. But I have a bill, H.R. 23, that says we want to give you a belated thank you with a payment for the last years of their life, most of whom are over 80 right now.

During World War II, these merchant mariners traversed the dangerous U-boat-laden waters of the Atlantic and the Pacific, faced down fierce air attacks from kamikaze planes, and were instrumental in every theater of war by carrying 95 percent of all tank supplies and troops during the Great War. As a result, they suffered, as was pointed out, the highest casualty rate of any of the military branches.

It is indisputable that the allied forces would not have been able to begin, sustain, or finish World War II without their valiant and selfless service.

When I first heard of the plight of the merchant mariners of World War II, I could not believe the treatment that they have received. They did not receive any recognition as veterans that they deserved, or the benefits of the GI bill which they had earned. And their fight for equality continued for over 40 years, when they finally attained veteran status after a

lengthy court battle. By then, over 125,000 of them had died.

I actually had the privilege of receiving the heart-wrenching testimony during a hearing before the Veterans' Affairs Committee from one of the named parties in that suit, in the 1980s, a merchant mariner named Stanley Willner. He was captured, interned, beaten, starved, and tortured as a POW for 3 years. He actually was one of the unfortunate group of Allied Forces who was forced to build the infamous bridge on the River Kwai.

Upon release, he weighed a mere 74 pounds. When he returned home, even his wife couldn't recognize him. Well, neither did his country. The brave merchant mariner received just 2 weeks of medical care and little else for his incredible service and sacrifice. What a travesty of justice.

Mr. Speaker, there are many more stories like this that tell about the merchant mariners of World War II, of opportunities lost and dreams foreclosed. It is long overdue that we treat these veterans the same as we try to do with all other veterans: Do our best to make them whole again.

As such, in recognition of the 74th anniversary of National Maritime Day, I invite all of the country and my colleagues to join me in recognizing the brave men and women of the sea who, like the Merchant Marine veterans of World War II, serve selflessly to ensure our Nation's continued safety and prosperity by voting in favor of this resolution, and then taking action, hopefully in a few weeks, where we give a belated "thank you" to the merchant mariners of World War II and pass H.R. 23.